

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, PFOR, UK
SUBJECT: YET ANOTHER SHADOW CABINET CHANGE

REFERENCE: LONDON 19562; LONDON A-44

1. JOHN BIFFEN, WHO WAS ELEVATED TO THE CONSERVATIVE FRONT BENCH BY MRS. THATCHER INITIALLY IN THE ENERGY PORTFOLIO AND MOVED TO INDUSTRY IN LAST NOVEMBER'S RE-SHUFFLE, PROFFERED HIS RESIGNATION FEBRUARY 28. HIS RESPONSIBILITIES WILL BE TAKEN OVER BY SIR KEITH JOSEPH, WHO RETAINS HIS OTHER ASSIGNMENT IN CHARGE OF POLICY AND RESEARCH.

2. BIFFEN'S RESIGNATION, OSTENSIBLY ON HEALTH GROUNDS, IS A SURPRISE. MRS. THATCHER IS KNOWN TO HAVE HAD SPECIAL CONFIDENCE IN HIM AND HE WAS RUMORED TO BE HIGH ON HER LIST FOR MAJOR GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY FOLLOWING AN ANTICIPATED CONSERVATIVE VICTORY IN A GENERAL ELECTION. HIS RETURN TO THE BACK BENCHES REPRESENTS A LOSS IN FRONT BENCH STRENGTH WHICH THE CONSERVATIVES CAN ILL AFFORD.

3. ACCORDING TO ONE OF HIS DEPUTIES, BIFFEN IS A "NATURAL BACK-BENCHER" BY INCLINATION AND, ALTHOUGH NOT HAPPY IN
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THE FRONT BENCH ROLE, HAD NOT SEEMED OVERLY TAXED BY HIS RESPONSIBILITIES. THE DEPUTY DENIED THAT POLICY DIFFERENCES PLAYED A PART IN HIS RESIGNATION.

4. A MEMBER OF MRS. THATCHER'S IMMEDIATE STAFF SAID THAT BIFFEN HAD TRIED TO RESIGN EARLIER BUT HAD BEEN TALKED OUT OF IT. HE TOO DISCOUNTED THE POSSIBILITY OF POLICY

DIFFERENCES AS AN EXPLANATION FOR THE RESIGNATION, LAYING STRESS ON BIFFEN'S HEAVY PRIVATE BUSINESS COMMITMENTS AND HIS QUIET, UNASSUMING APPROACH TO POLITICS WHICH WAS FRUSTRATEDBY THE REQUIREMENTS OF HIS ROLE AS A PARTY SPOKESMAN.

5. SIR KEITH'S RETURN TO A FRONT BENCH SPEAKING ROLE, WHILE SOMETHING HE HAS WANTED FOR A LONG TIME, IS NOT AN UNMIXED BLESSING FOR SOME OF HIS PARTY COLLEAGUES. THEY FEAR HIS ECONOMIC VIEWS WILL PUSH PARTY POLICIES EVEN FARTHER TO THE RIGHT AND HIS CONVOLUTED SPEAKING STYLE CONFUSE MORE THAN CLARIFY PARTY PRINCIPLES.

ARMSTRONG

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Message Attributes

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Disposition Approved on Date:
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